

M I S A I M I N G S

“Who concerning the Truth Have Misaimed” — 2 Timothy 2:18

Misaiming concerning the Availability of Grace

Misaiming: “It [grace] is a kind of sharing in divine life, a power that enables us to control sinful desire, live good lives, and win salvation. But grace is given to us by God gratuitously. We can’t call it down with a rain dance, and we can’t behave as we should without it. It is out of our control” (*First Things*, No. 71, March 1997, p. 14).

Truth: It is true that grace, as the believer’s birthright, is a “sharing in divine life,” but it is not accurate to claim that “we can’t call it down” and “it is out of our control.” Grace is the living Christ Himself freely given to us by God, readily and inexhaustibly available. According to God’s good pleasure, “He graced us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6). Grace, in fact, has come to us in the coming of Christ. John boldly proclaimed that the incarnated Christ was “full of grace” (John 1:14), and that “grace and reality came through Jesus Christ” (v. 17). The Lord’s incarnation, therefore, ushered in an age of abounding grace which continues to this day; the believer is sweetly reassured that “of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace” (v. 16). This bountiful grace of God is not only available through Christ—grace is Christ Himself. Hence, whenever Christ is experienced and enjoyed by us, grace is there. The apostle Paul had this experiential definition of grace in mind when he declared to Timothy, “The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you” (2 Tim. 4:22). When we have Christ, we have grace. In 1 Corinthians 15:10 Paul even personifies grace: “I labored...yet not I but the grace of God which is with me.” Taken with Galatians 2:20, it is evident that Paul is once again equating Christ with grace: “It is no longer I...but it is Christ who lives in me.” This precious grace is as available to the believer as Christ is, for grace is nothing less than Christ Himself in the believer’s experience and enjoyment. For this reason, we can at *any time* “come forward with boldness to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace for timely help” (Heb. 4:16).

Misaiming concerning the Oneness of the Trinity

Misaiming: “The Son of God, theologians say, is one of three eternal Persons of the Trinity—‘person’ is defined as possessing intellect, emotion, and volition. So while the Trinity is one God, the Father, Son and Spirit, each has His own mind, feelings and will....Jesus was still God,

yet a separate person” (*Preaching*, Vol. 12, No. 1, July-August 1996, p. 27).

Truth: The balanced, twofold truth revealed in Scripture consistently maintains that the “persons” of the Trinity are *distinct* but not *separate*. To claim that Jesus is “a separate person” from the Father and the Spirit is a serious misaiming which can lead to tritheism. Interestingly, the Bible never actually uses the word *persons* to describe the Trinity, and if we press that term with its natural, human denotation too far, we end up in the heresy of having three separate Gods. Indeed, many believers unwittingly pray to three different Gods, based on their perception of the Trinity as more separate than united. It is thus much safer to affirm the Bible’s revelation of the *distinctions* within the Trinity and avoid the extreme of *separation*. There are verses which emphasize distinction within the Trinity, and taken in isolation, these would seem to indicate a separation. However, the Bible always presents a balanced view of the Trinity by also emphasizing the oneness among the “persons” of the Triune God. Still clearer are the Scriptures which indicate *both* unity *and* distinction within the Godhead.

Passages emphasizing distinction include the scene portrayed in Matthew 3:16-17 where the Son is baptized, the Holy Spirit is descending, and the Father is speaking from the heavens. The distinction among the Trinity continues to be affirmed following the Lord’s resurrection, particularly by verses which emphasize God’s working within the believers and their inward experience of Him. For example, in 2 Corinthians 13:14 Paul prayed that God the Father’s love, Christ the Son’s grace, and the Spirit’s fellowship would be with us all. Similarly, in Ephesians 3:14-17 Paul prayed to the Father for the Spirit to strengthen us in order that Christ may make His home in our hearts. Such verses emphasize the aspect of the economical distinction between the Father, Son, and Spirit for the accomplishment of His purpose within His believers.

Other verses temper this view, safeguarding us from carrying the economical distinction too far. Lest we err in attempting to separate the persons of the Trinity, we are provided verses which underscore the essential unity of the Trinity in His existence, such as John 10:30: “I and the Father are one.” In verse 38 Christ the Son states,

“The Father is in Me and I am in the Father.” The Lord attested to this practical oneness when Philip asked to see the Father: “Have I been so long a time with you, and you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father....I am in the Father and the Father is in Me” (14:8-10). A few verses later, Christ identifies Himself intrinsically with the Spirit as well. He promised that “another Comforter...the Spirit of reality” would come (v. 16-17), but then declared, “I am coming to you” (v. 18, emphasis added). Second Corinthians 3:17 also extends this unity beyond the Father and Son to incorporate the Holy Spirit, declaring, “The Lord is the Spirit.”

Even more compelling are verses which indicate both the distinction as well as the essential coinherence within the Trinity. We can see this balance in Matthew 28:19 where we are charged to baptize new disciples into *the name* (singular) of the Father, Son, and Spirit (plural). Likewise, John 1:1 tells us that in the beginning Christ as the Word was with God (distinct), yet was God (inseparable). The Old Testament similarly testifies to this twofold truth: Isaiah 9:6 heralds the newborn Christ who is a child, yet God; He is the Son, yet simultaneously exists as the Father. The entire revelation of the Triune God thus reveals an eternal distinction among the Father, Son, and Spirit as well as a simultaneous essential unity, a balance which the believer’s understanding and experience should reflect.

Misaiming concerning External Stimuli in Worship

Misaiming: “In the church we see ‘lightness of being’ even quite literally in church architecture. The church growth movement, unwittingly merging gnostic influences with modern marketing trends, rids churches of all of that ‘heavy stuff’....The designer’s goal is to create an atmosphere of neutrality and comfort for the people, not to evoke a sense of divine holiness for worshippers” (Michael Horton, *In the Face of God*, p. 24).

Truth: It requires a leap of imagination to link the architectural simplification of worship buildings with the ancient heresy of gnosticism. The term *gnostic* is one of those hackle-raising, alarm-ringing words which are usually abstract in definition and vague in application. Behind this rhetoric, however, there is a tone of nostalgic sentimentality

and a longing for “spiritual” responses which massive, medieval, Gothic architecture tend to evoke, as if these responses somehow represent a higher and more lasting degree of godliness. Here reformers seek to bring us back to the sixteenth century, not back to the Bible itself.

The Lord Jesus made it very clear that in the New Testament age, worship is not dependent upon physical structures (“Neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem,” John 4:21). Outward stimuli are not needed to “evoke a sense of divine holiness.” For *real* worship, what is necessary is that the worshippers be “in spirit and truthfulness” (v. 24), and this can be achieved anywhere—even in a prison cell. In fact, at the very outset of the church age, God allowed the impressive temple in Jerusalem to be obliterated, replacing it with the spirits of the believers. Again and again the early church was found meeting in houses (Rom. 16:5, 23; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15). Furthermore, John was able to be “in spirit on the Lord’s Day” even while exiled on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9-10). Promoting the ‘heavy stuff’ may actually distract worshippers from focusing on Christ Himself, making it more difficult to worship in spirit and truthfulness.

It is a stretch of logic to accuse believers who have chosen to simplify their meeting places of being under the influences of both gnosticism and “modern marketing trends.” Paul, in debating with the gnostic philosophers in Athens, sought to persuade them of the exact opposite view: “The God who made the world...does not dwell in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24). While places of worship can be convenient and practical, we should not misaim in ascribing some spiritual function to these arrangements of bricks, stones, and lumber, as if they somehow enhance the quality of our worship. At best, they provide believers with a suitable gathering place. At worst, they are so ornate as to distract the gathered believers from the genuine worship of God in spirit and in truthfulness, as exemplified in the following stanza: “Gathered in Thy name, Lord Jesus, / Losing sight of all but Thee, / O what joy Thy presence gives us, / Calling up our hearts to Thee!” (*Hymns* 188). It is Christ Himself alone who is worthy of the gathered believers’ attention and appreciation. To seek anything else, even “a sense of divine holiness,” is to misaim from Him as our unique object of love and worship.

by the Editors

The faith equals the contents of the economy, the household administration, the dispensation, of God. The truth is the contents, the reality, of the faith according to God’s economy. Healthy teaching, healthy words, and healthy speech are the ministry of the truth, ministering to people the realities of the divine truths. Eternal life is the means and power to carry out the divine realities of the faith. Godliness is a living that expresses the divine reality, an expression of God in all His riches. Faith (subjective) is the response to the truth of the faith (objective); such faith receives and participates in the divine realities. The conscience is a test and a check to preserve us in the faith.

Recovery Version, 1 Tim. 1:1, note 1